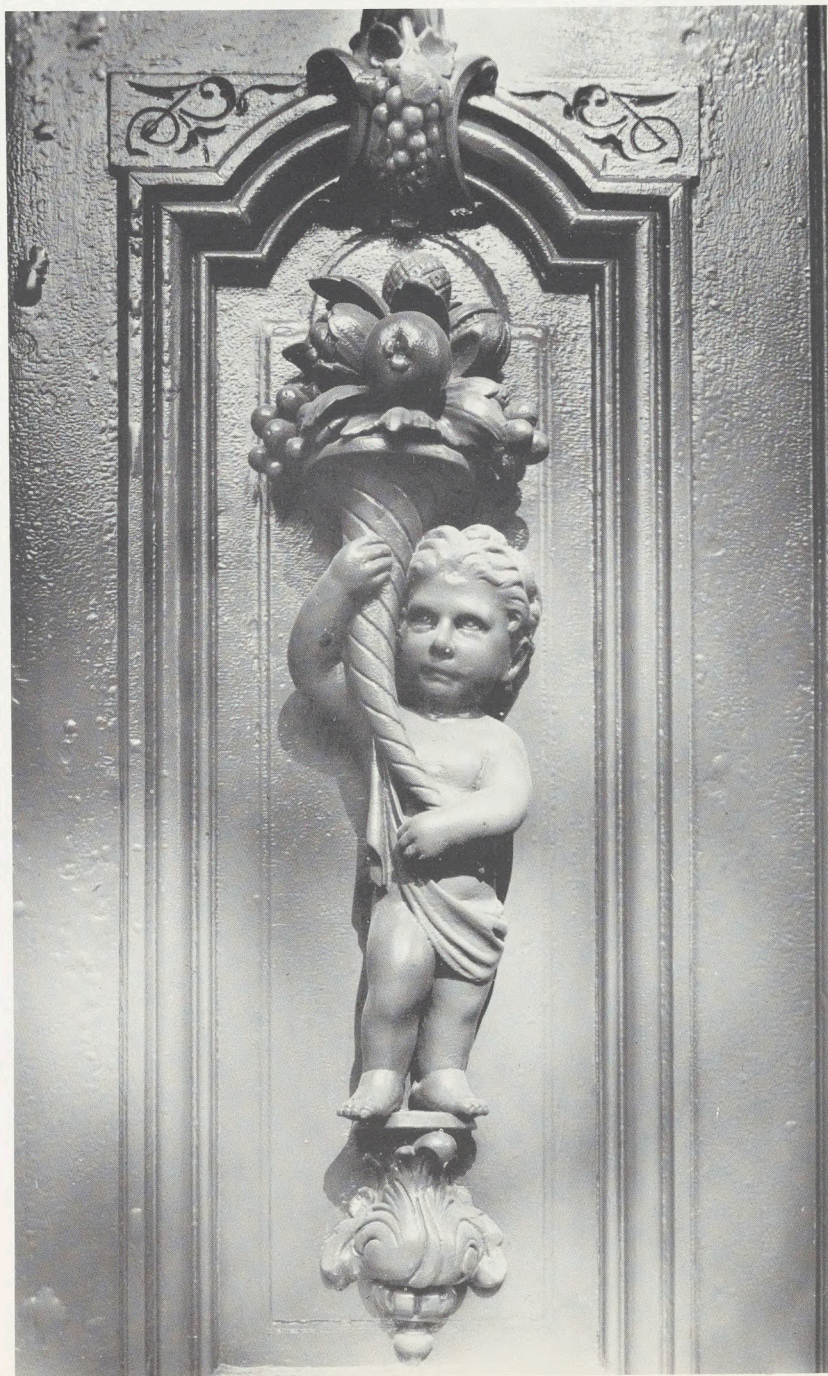


CLARENCE JOHN LAUGHLIN

Photographs of Victorian Chicago



The Corcoran Gallery of Art
Washington, D.C.

March 2–April 14, 1968

An exhibition of photography as a major art form has not been presented at the Gallery for several years. This exhibition, by one of America's most creative artists, Clarence John Laughlin, illustrates and illuminates the architecture and character of Chicago of the late nineteenth century. The exhibition brings to light a neglected and almost forgotten era of American Victorian architecture.

The artist wishes to record his appreciation to James Harithas for his deep interest in his work and encouragement in this exhibition.

Rosemary Jones of the Curatorial staff was responsible for the organization and installation of the exhibition.

HERMANN WARNER WILLIAMS, JR.
Director

COVER: This unique door on an old house in Chicago's "Old Town" looks like the work of a local, self-taught wood carver, since the proportions of the cherub are anything but correct. But this very disproportion gives it a kind of charm, and expressiveness, it could not otherwise have.

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Clarence John Laughlin spent the early part of his life on a plantation near New Iberia, Louisiana, in the heart of the sugar cane country, and came to New Orleans with his parents at the age of seven. He now lives, when not on his frequent travels, in one of the huge old Pontalba Buildings, in the center of the Vieux Carré of New Orleans.

During his late teens, Laughlin developed an intense interest in literature and in writing. In 1936, he made his first photographs, and his interest in writing plus his later interests in poetry, architecture, and metaphysics have all had a profound influence on the development of his photographic work.

In the period 1936–1941, Laughlin photographed the old buildings of New Orleans while employed as a Civil Service photographer with the U. S. Engineer Office in New Orleans. He later worked with Vogue Studios in New York and with the National Archives in Washington, D.C. In November, 1942, he enlisted in the Signal Corps, and spent almost four years in the Army, three of which were with a unit of the Office of Strategic Services specializing in color photography. Following his discharge in 1946, Laughlin returned to New Orleans where he continued his career.

Several years ago, Laughlin began his study of Chicago which has resulted in this exhibition. Laughlin states: "The Chicago project was a major part of my prolonged attempts to re-discover Victorian America, and the meaning of the American past for our contemporary world—attempts which have been made in such various cities as Milwaukee,

St. Louis, San Francisco, Galveston, and elsewhere."

Laughlin's main objectives have been to find little-known or largely ignored material and to discover its significance for our times. Laughlin makes the following statements in regard to his studies: "But we should *not* consider the re-discovery of American Victorian architecture as merely an adventure in nostalgia. Instead, it gradually became apparent to me, after careful study of the material I found, that: (1) the Victorians have much to teach us with regard to the *humanization* of buildings—because instinctively, they made some important discoveries in connection with what can be called 'psychological functionalism' in architecture (which includes factors which go way beyond the kind of physical functionalism we are attempting); (2) that they understood in a much more profound way than we do, the importance of 'decoration' and 'fantasy' in houses; (3) that the really good American Victorian houses became *truly* American (they broke with European influences)—and became related to the spirit of American places; and became much more expressive, for instance, than English Victorian."

Victorian architecture in America was characterized by its ornate woodwork, wrought iron grill railings and wooden porches. Each structure was a symbol of the time and in complete harmony with the heavy meals, strong drink and boisterous behavior of its occupants. For those of the *nouveau riche* class, it was an apropos statement of their superb confidence in the American way.

The typical style of Victorian architecture and design is generally regarded today as dark, heavy and

gaudy, and to most, indicates an abyss of taste. To the contrary, the Victorian builders displayed an initiative and individuality unsurpassed in American architecture. The decoration of basically stolid structures was light and fanciful. The details of each structure were personal expressions of the builder's feeling or sentiment. The columnated portico of the Brewer's Palace (Plate No. 5), and the marble cemetery statue (Plate No. 7), reveal the personal, sentimental, and often moral attitudes of their creators. The epithet "Victorian" does not indicate a specific style, but is rather a combination of styles from many countries and periods. The unique building on Chicago's south side, with its Byzantine domes and the Baroque and Rococo entrance (Plate No. 5), exemplifies the eclectic "Victorian feeling." Ornamental details rather than complete structures have been selected by the photographer to reveal the amusing and fanciful aspect of the Victorian, such as the wrought iron porch (Plate No. 6), and The Henry S. Dietrich Mansion (Plate No. 4). The Victorian architect displayed an aptitude for vigorous experimentation, and even his failures had at least the merit of individuality.

Laughlin's fascinating and imaginative photographs of Chicago, with views ranging from public edifices to private mansions, reveal the city as few have discovered it. The artist's eye for detail and his ability to discover the unusual and often bizarre, combined to present some of the most original ma-

terial covered by a contemporary photographer in any American city. Laughlin's insight into the field of American Victorian architecture is remarkable. He immediately grasps what is eye-appealing, imaginative and individualistic. A statue in a cemetery, a window decoration, a stairway, an iron spiderweb, are all candidates for Laughlin's camera. The grandiose mansions are impressive, but it is the details that capture the whimsical and often completely human aspect of the Victorian. Clarence John Laughlin is a dedicated and modest man, whose perceptive photographs rediscover our lost heritage of American Victorian architecture.

Clarence Laughlin is the author of two books: *New Orleans and Its Living Past* written in 1941, and *Ghosts Along the Mississippi* in 1948, and has written articles for *Art News*, *American Heritage*, *The Architectural Review* (London), and *L'Oeil Magazine* (Paris). Since 1936, he has had over two hundred one-man exhibitions in museums and university art galleries throughout the United States, and is presently circulating five different exhibitions through the country. Examples of his photographs are in many public collections, including the Art Institute of Chicago; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Fogg Museum, Cambridge; The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; and The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

ROSEMARY JONES



PLATE NO. 2: A generally ignored aspect of Chicago's architecture is the extraordinary character, and abundance of fantastic creatures—demons, monsters, dragons—that can be found in stone, wood and iron throughout the city. Beneath a window with stained glass, for instance, suddenly appears this astonishing head of a horned demon, with world-weary eyes, and a protruding mouth.



PLATE NO. 3: *Brewer's Palace (The Francis J. Dewes Mansion, Chicago)*. Francis J. Dewes, one of the foremost German brewers of Chicago, had this building erected in 1896. The structure harks back to the Baroque and Rococo magnificence of Bavaria.



PLATE NO. 4: *House of the Five Gables (The Henry S. Dietrich Mansion)*. In the spare, pure, and almost entirely angular forms of the Dietrich Mansion, in suburban Chicago, we can see the appearance of an indigenous *American* feeling for wood, something not copied from Europe.



PLATE NO. 5: This unique building on Chicago's south side, was worked on apparently by one of the most imaginative sheet metal designers in the city. The entire turret, pediment, cornices, window frames and domes are of sheet metal over wood and brick.



PLATE NO. 6: The lightness, the grace, the elegance of this truly superb wrought iron ensemble works all the better because of the massiveness of the stone forms. This is wrought iron of a quality which not even New Orleans can equal.



PLATE NO. 7: The marble figures of two sisters, who apparently died at the same time, and which are actually protected by a glass case, are set in the middle of one of Chicago's great cemeteries.

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